DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 042 FL 018 364

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TITLE Joking Repair and the Organization of Repair in Conversation.
PUB DATE 29 Dec 89
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (Washington, DC, December 27-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Error Analysis (Language); *Error Correction; *Humor; Interaction; *Interpersonal Communication; *Language Patterns; Language Research; *Language Styles; Linguistic Theory

ABSTRACT

This analysis looks at the humorous use of second-speaker repeats to initiate conversational repair. It is proposed that consideration of joking repeats forces reanalysis of the organization of conversational repair. The preference analysis theory is rejected in favor of a locally governed analysis of conversational repair in which participants negotiate the course of repair based on how they perceive their respective abilities to successfully complete a correction. In joking repair, one participant pretends to misunderstand something a second speaker, with whom the participant is involved in conversation, has said in order to make a pun before providing a serious response. A crucial word or phrase is repeated, incorporating some change to bring out a new meaning. Because speakers are accountable for their own speech, any correction by another speaker naturally presents a challenge; the pretended misunderstanding and correction by the second speaker presents the additional challenge of discovering the unintended meaning, correlating with joking's test function. The humor of joking repairs arises from simultaneous application of conflicting frames to one single stretch of talk. It is the rapid alternation between such mutually incompatible frames that leads to laughter. This analysis of conversational joking also led to re-evaluation of the general purpose and goals of everyday speech. (MSE)

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JOKING REPAIR AND THE ORGANIZATION OF REPAIR IN CONVERSATION

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Discourse Analysis

Friday 12-29-1989

INTRODUCTION

Joking repairs abound in conversational humor. They often function as if to correct or to initiate corrective action on the foregoing turn. I try to show that such joking repairs provide evidence for a locally negotiated organization of repair as opposed to the generalized preference analysis of Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks (1977). My investigation of repair in conversational joking supports Lakoff's (1973, 1982) view that speakers follow Rules of Rapport as opposed to Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and the associated maxims.

For purposes of this paper, I will focus on the humorous use of second-speaker repeats as if to initiate repair. As Schegloff (1987) demonstrates, participants in talk-in-interaction sometimes pretend misunderstanding of the previous turn to pun on it before providing the serious response which is sequentially relevant. This 'joke first' practice may thus involve manipulating a perfectly fine utterance as one would if it were in need of correction. Ros does this in the passage on your first handout, pretending to misunderstand <u>categories</u> and repeating it with a final juncture on <u>cat</u> to introduce a favorite topic of her own.

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Neal: The novel is about. The novel- the book. Why did I do that twice? The book's about (0.5) categories=

Ros: =It's really a novel appro(h)oach hh. (1.0) Ick. hehhe.

Neal: Pun of the week.

Pet: huhhuh/huhhuh

Neal: The book is a:::

Pet: huhhuhhuh.

Neal: Anyway. I don't wanna explain it.

Pet: huhhuh

Ros: ehehheh/hehhe

Neal: Th- the point is it's about ca::tegories. And wh- what they entail.

Ros: Cat. -egor/ies. I can/ get into that. hehheh.

Pet: hehheh

Neal: And in particular. Categories /are/

Pet: ca::degories

Neal: built around prototypes.

Pet: hehe pro::de(hehe)types he hahhah.

Neal: That's how I talk.

According to the preference account of repair, Ros's direct correction counts as a highly dispreferred turn, which supports strong inferences; but this provides no systematic explanation for the laughter here, nor for the implied challenge to the other participants to get the joke - not to mention the apparent bid to change the topic. On the analysis proposed below, participants negotiate the organization of repair locally, based on which of

them seems best able to complete the sequence. Any direct correction presents a challenge, because no second speaker can reasonably alter the contribution of the speaker who conceived it, without calling his or her basic knowledge and speaking ability into question. The humor follows from the sudden reversal of sense from category to cat based on the spurious similarity in sound.

A second use of repetition as if to correct is caricaturing an error or oddity in foregoing talk, as Pet does when I continue my monologue in spite of laughter. Far from initiating a serious corrective sequence to move the main conversation along, Ros and Pet repeatedly focus on aspects of my talk unrelated to the current topic to generate amusement. This clearly runs completely counter to Grice's Cooperative Principle. In particular, it violates the maxim of relevance directly and across multiple successive turns. Furthermore, the only implicature the violations seem to generate is that they want to embarrass me, to take me to task for my choice of words and habits of speech. But these implicatures violate social maxims of politeness. So I see no way to avoid the assumption of a principle at work in interaction which overrides the Cooperative Principle and the usual social maxims. The principle in question apparently places amusement ahead of information exchange as a goal of everyday casual conversation. Instead of predicting that irrelevant joking asides will generate implicatures, this principle would predict that conversationalists look for opportunities to introduce

humorous digression, and welcome such digressions by others in the spirit of shared enjoyment. This goes against Sherzer's (1978) characterization of intentional punning as disruptive, since precisely this sort of playful interaction may often be the goal of a conversation; and it supports Lakoff's contention that Rules of Rapport are primary in conversation. In pretending to beliefs or caricaturing voices not their own, speakers introduce a play frame in the sense of Bateson (1952) and Fry (1963). Once established in a conversation, a play frame makes it impossible for participants to take any utterance at face value. So joking leads to levity, and levity leads to more joking. A conversation out of kilter may continue to generate playful turns, resisting attempts to get back to the main topic, as in the passage on the first handout, where Ros and Pet conspire to stop me from talking about linguistics. At line 9, I almost give up and say I do not want to explain the thesis of the book. Then, in spite of laughter, I forge ahead. I even take Ros's cat.-egories pun in stride until Pet begins caricaturing my pronunciation of technical terms. I finally give up and let the conversation turn to matters of more general interest. This points up the use of joking to change topic, in particular to transform a monologue into a general conversation and/or to move from information exchange to group rapport as the goal of the interaction. The infectiousness of joking provides further evidence that conversationalists are motivated by a goal far more important than cooperating in the exchange of relevant information. Enjoyable social contact and positive self-image win out over objective truth and succinctness,

so Grice's maxims lose their force. The revisionist Gricean analysis by Sperber and Wilson (1986), where the Cooperative Principle and four maxims collapse into the single blanket requirement of relevance, seems initially to fare somewhat better. At least for puns like that connecting categories and cat, one might claim a fortuitous phonetic relevance in spite of the glaring irrelevance in terms of topic or information. But Pet's mocking repeats are not even puns; their relevance appears only in the challenge they present to me and the amusement they create. This brings us back to the problem of accounting for the presence of humor at all, despite its lack of contextual relevance. The existence, and especially the persistence, of humor in conversation suggests that it must appeal to some principle higher than that which mandates relevance to the current information exchange. In particular, joking must be relevant to interaction as social contact, even when it violates the maxim of relevance for interaction as communication proper. As Lakoff (1982) and Tannen (1986) point out, memorable conversations are not those in which much information was exchanged concisely, but rather those laced with irrelevant pleasantries and humorous digressions. Now - all seriousness aside - I would like to develop an interactional account of conversational joking which builds on work by Sacks and Sherzer. Sacks (1974) analyzed a joke in conversation, concentrating on the organization of the telling, but he also noted that jokes have a test function: the speaker demonstrates knowledge and challenges hearers to prove they understand. Sherzer (1985) goes beyond Sacks in identifying a twofold

aggression in jokes: against the hearer, who is subjected to a little intelligence test, and against the butt of the joke - perhaps a person or group the teller and hearer conspire to laugh at. I follow Sacks and Sherzer in recognizing both aggression and a test element in jokes and joking, but insist that both the teller and the hearer learn something about each other, and stress that the test routinely aims to find common ground, rather than to embarrass the hearer. Thus, we would be more likely to quote Cogito ergo consum to a colleague familiar with Descartes, in a spirit of sharing, than as a put down to someone we expected to know no Latin. It is up to the joker to signal the play frame and to express the jest in a form accessible to members of a certain group, and it is up to the hearer to interpret and then reinterpret the turn to get the joke, and to show understanding with laughter. If the two hook up with each other and get the timing right, they both share in the payoff of amusement and increased rapport.

In my second example, a second-speaker repeat identifies a whole stretch of speech as in need of correction; the first speaker must deal not only with the challenge of discovering and resolving the problem but also with the embarrassment of having made an error.

Brad: ...this concern about America. And::. What was going on in the world, and about the little guy, and the depression, and=

Neal: =I understand that.

Brad: Y'know.

Neal: I'm in favor of the depression. I think you can /do that-

Brad: Haha (h)I'm in favor of the depression /hahahehehe.

Neal: Hhaw. I'm in favor of the little guy, especially in times like the depression.

Nevertheless, even in giving a test - as Sacks and Sherzer would have it - Brad supplies sufficient reconstruction of the error for easy recognition; and in spite of potential embarrassment and the challenge to find and correct the error, I am laughing about my own slip even as I produce the correction.

Notice, furthermore, that Brad repeats my slip word for word, including the first person pronoun I, instead of switching to you. It initially seems odd that he chooses not to make the regular deictic pronoun shift. By retaining I, however, Brad makes it perfectly clear that his repeat serves only to identify the locus of a correction in form, rather than to challenge me for the content of my utterance: he signals his recognition that this is a pure slip of the tongue, which I will immediately correct once I become aware of it. You're in favor of the depression, by contrast, implies that I actually hold the opinion I expressed, so it presents a more serious challenge. In fact, there is a

potential three-way contrast, since Brad might even say He's in favor of the depression. In the presence of other hearers, this would amount to Brad's aligning himself against me, so I would feel compelled to defend my view or at least explain the blunder; but even in the absence of a real audience, a second speaker could use the third person pronoun in a repeat like this as if to identify an error for imagined hearers, and thus to take sides with them. So Brad really chooses the least threatening of three parallel forms for his repeat, and the exchange as a whole conduces more to bonding between the participants than to face loss or gain for either one. And in general among approximate social equals, joking usually serves to defuse aggression and create solidarity. When group members express aggression against outsiders, they do so within the group as a show of solidarity, rather than as an open challenge to the non-members.

With this background on the dynamics of joking interaction, we are ready to take another look at the first example. In the theory of repair Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) espouse, Ros's second-speaker correction in the turn immediately following the repairable is highly dispreferred. Its occurrence without hedges or indirectness, and instead of initiation only, which is less highly marked, demands that the first speaker infer special meanings. Among these, he or she may infer that the correction is meant as a joke. But this preference analysis offers no direct explanation of why the correction counts as a challenge to the first speaker or how to infer its nonserious character. I would like to argue, by contrast, that repair in general and correction

in particular is a locally negotiated matter, and that the person seen as best able to accomplish a repair in any micro-context is responsible for doing it or not. This means that ceteris paribus corrections will proceed from adults to children, from teachers to students, from native speakers to nonnatives and so on. Of course, this does not prevent a six-year-old from correcting my wrong name for a dinosaur or from blurting out the right answer during class discussion to expedite the ongoing interaction; in fact, these cases follow from the participants' perception of their differential abilities to accomplish a correction. Since, further, any participant is accountable for his or her own contributions to a conversation, any correction by another speaker signals that this other feels better suited - more knowledgeable, more articulate - than the first speaker, which directly threatens his or her face and counts as a challenge. A correction done by a second speaker who is clearly pretending misunderstanding further tests the first speaker's ability to discover ambiguity in the first turn, which naturally hooks up with my analysis of joking as a test, and humor as requiring two co-present frames. The preference theory of repair offers no obvious explanation of why a correction should work as a test or a joke, only that it is dispreferred and allows some inference.

CONCLUSION

I have tried, through discussion of examples involving humorous second-speaker repeats, to elucidate some of the forms and functions of conversational joking. I hope to have shown, first, that consideration of joking repeats forces a reanalysis of the organization of repair. In particular, the preference analysis proposed by Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks (1977) provides no link to the humor or challenge aspect of joking at all. I suggested instead a locally governed analysis of repair in which participants negotiate its course based on how they perceive their respective abilities to complete the correction successfully. In joking repair, one participant pretends to see some problem and repeats the crucial word or phrase with some change to bring out a new meaning. Since speakers are accountable for their own talk, any correction by another naturally presents a challenge. But the pretended misunderstanding and correction by the second speaker presents an additional challenge to discover the unintended meaning. This correlates with the test function of joking noted by Sacks (1974) and Sherzer (1985). The humor of joking repairs arises from the simultaneous application of conflicting frames to one single stretch of talk. According to the bisociation theory of humor, it is the rapid alternation between such mutually incompatible frames which leads to laughter. This analysis of conversational joking also led to a re-evaluation of the purpose and goals of everyday talk generally.

In particular, we saw that joking provides strong evidence against the Gricean Cooperative Principle or any analysis of conversation which sees it primarily as a system for the efficient exchange of information. The pervasiveness of joking shows that it is far from being a disruption or a momentary abberation; and the infectiousness of verbal humor in particular argues that word play can become a goal in itself. I have suggested instead, in line with Lakoff's Rules of Rapport, that conversationalists actively engage in joking to render interaction more pleasant and conducive to solidarity. Though a second speaker may draw attention to a slip in the preceding turn, thus potentially embarrassing the first speaker and challenging him or her to recognize and correct the error, this task is usually easy enough to solve in the given context, so that the first speaker really receives an opportunity to demonstrate membership and to share enjoyment over the jest. Developing the notion of jokes as tests from Sacks and Sherzer, I argued that we signal and test for attitudes and membership in groups, at times aligning ourselves with some coconversationalists and against others to influence the topical organization and flow talk. Since joking creates amusement and rapport, it affects conversational dynamics and accomplishes topic changes without antagonizing participants.

TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS USED

.	Period indicates falling tone in preceding unit.
?	Question mark indicates a rising tone in preceding unit.
,	Comma indicates a continuing intonation.
/ /	Left slash indicates point at which next speaker interrupts; right slash indicates where overlap ends.
=	Equals sign shows latching between successive turns.
word	Underlining shows heavy stress.
::	Colons indicate prolongation of foregoing consonant or syllable in proportion to number present.
wh-	Hyphen indicates a cut off with a glottal stop.
O(ho)kay	Parentheses within word enclose laughter.

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